

Random Thoughts on the Crisis of Authority in the ELCA

by Carl E. Braaten

We are living in strange times. Our church, the ELCA, can no longer be trusted as our mother. Growing up, I always thought my mother knew best. As a child I was taught the fourth commandment, "Honor your father and mother." When I became a father, I wanted my children to obey this commandment of God. Along with some ancient theologians -- Cyprian, Athanasius, and Augustine -- I do believe that the church is my mother. But I do not trust her anymore. I am sad about that.

There are two things I never expected to witness in the kind of Lutheranism in which I was raised and which I have served as a pastor and a teacher for over half a century. I know that none of that experience counts for much in my mother church today. In fact, it seems rather to be a liability. The message we get is, "Get lost. We don't want to hear what you have to say." But this is what I have to confess, whether any one cares to hear it or not. I never expected that Lutheran pastors living in sexual union with members of the same gender would be approved for the ordained ministry in any orthodox Lutheran church that accepts the Scriptures, Creeds, and Confessions as their symbols of authority. I never expected that the majority of pastors and bishops of the church to which I belong would believe that sexual behavior outside of marriage is in accord with the sixth commandment. Also, I never expected that so many Lutheran pastors and theologians would find life within Lutheranism so heretical that they would bail out to become Roman Catholics. Speaking only for myself, this is like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire, but the fact is, many are tempted to take this plunge, be-

cause the ELCA is perceived to be inhospitable to orthodox Christian teaching. This is not merely my personal opinion. It is a story told by many honest and loyal sons and daughters of the ELCA or one of its predecessor church bodies.

Segments of Lutheranism in North America have been invaded by an alien theology. No one is sure of the best way to label it. Call it modernism or revisionism, it comes to the same thing. Traditional Lutheran theology based on the Scriptures, its Confessions and the ancient Creeds of the Church has been under siege since the birth of the ELCA, around twenty years ago. My own studies and observation have led me to the conviction that the ism we are talking about is a modern version of that most ancient of heresies, gnosticism. Gnosticism is the breeding ground of bad theology (heresy) which drives out good theology (orthodoxy). The anti-gnostic fathers of the ancient church -- Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus -- testified that gnosticism produces an alien gospel based more on esoteric mysteries than on the sacred Scriptures. Against the novelties of gnosticism they set the verities of the apostolic tradition. By the apostolic tradition they had in mind the Old and New Testaments, the Creeds of the Church, and the Offices of the Holy Ministry -- bishops, pastors, and deacons. The Holy Scriptures were interpreted in light of the Creeds, and the purpose of the ministerial Offices was to oversee the faithful transmission of the orthodox catholic truth. Without the effective ministry of such offices in the ancient church, there would have been no Creed of Nicaea and gnosticism would have won out.

Fast forward to today. We do have the Scriptures and the Creeds in our ELCA confession of faith. And we do have ministerial offices. Lutheran Churches have always had

properly called and ordained ministers. Now given the ELCA agreement with the Episcopal Church USA, we even have bishops putatively in apostolic succession. But something is wrong. The ELCA now has apostolic succession without apostolic success. By success I mean faithful adherence to the great tradition of evangelical, catholic and orthodox Christianity. We now have bishops who bear the title and may wear the outward signs of succession, the purple rabat and the pectoral cross, but as a whole they have failed to keep the ELCA on the right track. Revisionism has overtaken their synod assemblies and has led them astray.

Lutherans know what a bishop is supposed to do, according to Article 28 of the *Augsburg Confession*. It reads: "According to the Gospel, or, as they say, by divine right, the jurisdiction belongs to bishops as bishops (that is, to those to whom the ministry of Word and Sacraments has been committed): to forgive sins, to judge doctrine, to reject teaching that opposes the Gospel, and to exclude from the communion of the church the ungodly, whose ungodliness is known -- doing all this not with human power but by the Word." Notice that the bishop's job description is not determined by the will of the laity, nor by the majority of voting members at a synodical meeting, nor by the the ELCA constitution. It is based on the Gospel; it is established by divine right (*ius divinum*, in Latin). It comes from above, not from below.

Do the bishops of the ELCA live up to that job description? If they did, the ELCA would not be in the mess in which it finds itself today. We wouldn't read in *The Lutheran* magazine about Bishops Chilstrom, Erdahl, Rogness, Johnson and others presiding at a service that welcomes practicing homosexuals into the holy ministry of Christ's

Church. They believe they are being prophetic, when in fact by their actions they are entering that long lineage of rogue bishops who claim the liberty to do whatever they wish. The ELCA is not the only Protestant denomination that has rogue bishops acting out of line. The Episcopal Church has its Bishops Pike, Spong, Robinson and Schori.

When a church is in trouble, when its members are embroiled in a protracted struggle in which their church is being engulfed by its surrounding culture, then it is essential to return to the drawing board and ask, "What is the nature and function of the church?" Just as you can tell a leopard by its spots, so you can tell a church by its marks. The Nicene Creed lists four marks: the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Martin Luther composed a different sort of list in his writing, "On the Councils and the Church." Without negating the traditional four marks, Luther identified seven marks of the church: The Word of God, the sacrament of baptism, the sacrament of the altar, the office of the keys, the offices of ministry, public worship, and the cross of suffering (discipleship).

This list is not an arbitrary invention of Martin Luther. Luther was a biblical theologian, so you might expect that he derived his understanding of the church from its apostolic Scriptures. The church of the apostles arose in history in the wake of Jesus' life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. Everything we know about Jesus and the beginning of the church is based on what his closest friends and followers remembered about him. Then they committed their memory to manuscript. Thus we have the writings we call the New Testament. Every church since the first century must measure itself with reference to the apostolic church that Jesus founded in the power of his Spirit.

Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Math 16: 18), and he built it on the foundation of the apostles, with himself as its chief cornerstone.

We received from the apostolic church six distinguishing characteristics that belong to the church. Allow me to use six Greek words that are used so often in theological writings, that they commonly appear without benefit of translation. They are: *kerygma*, *martyra*, *didache*, *koinonia*, *diakonia*, and *leiturgia*. From the apostles we have received the *kerygma*, the message of and about Jesus Christ. The apostles gave us their testimony, their witness to Christ, their *martyria*. They were martyrs for Christ, because of the witness they bore to him. We have received their *didache*, the teaching of the apostles. We have been incorporated into their *koinonia*, the fellowship of the apostles through baptism and the breaking of bread. And for the apostles *diakonia* is a fundamental part of the Christian life, the diaconal acts of mercy to the sick, the poor, and the hungry. And finally, the apostles gathered the believers in Christ together for *leiturgia*, for public acts of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. It is the work of the people of God, their liturgy. We have received all these wonderful things from the apostolic church.

But notice that an important feature of the apostolic church is missing on that list. That is *exousia* -- the spiritual authority invested in the person of Christ and then handed on to his disciples and then to the apostles. This authority did not end with the death of the last apostle. It is imparted to the community through a succession of apostolic leaders by means of prayer and the laying on of hands. There was teaching authority in the early church. The writings of Paul and the other apostles possessed authority. The decrees of the councils of the church possessed authority. Presbyters (pastors) and bish-

ops possessed authority to lead their churches and congregations. Titus 1: 7 states: “A bishop must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it.” According to the apostolic tradition the authority of Christ is bestowed on those called by the Spirit of God the Father into the service of the church by means of ordination through the imposition of hands and prayer. This is not merely the doing of human beings; it is not merely a beautiful church ceremony. If that’s all there were to it, we might just as well skip it.

Apostolicity is one of the four marks of the church, according to the Nicene Creed. The core of apostolicity is the witness to Christ, given to us in the New Testament. The churches of today need to firm up their links to the apostolic sources of faith. Why? Because we face a crisis of teaching authority in our churches. It seems as if there are no boundaries. If a Lutheran pastor wishes to be a Wiccan, a practitioner of pagan rituals, that’s okay; there’s no discipline. Like other Protestant denominations, the ELCA does not know how to deal with heresy. Anything goes. Now, I hope no one has the gall to claim that there is no need for discipline, because there is no heresy to name and condemn. We live in a hospitable church; all are welcome! Heretics too? Not only in the pew but also in the pulpit? C’mon! The last thing a church or any of its bishops want to be accused of is heresy-hunting. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “The concept of heresy has been lost today because there is no teaching authority.” He did not mean that churches today no longer affirm the authority of the Bible. Of course, they say they do. He did not mean that Lutherans today reject the Ecumenical Creeds and the Book of Concord. The ELCA Confession of Faith acknowledges them as normative. But who reads the *Book of Concord*? Has Bishop Mark Hanson ever read it? We don’t know

because he never refers to any part of it in his opinion pieces. Bonhoeffer was on to something. All of the documents to which we have referred are paper authorities, and as such they are liable to suffer the fate of being ignored or twisted to mean whatever reader-response hermeneutics wishes them to say. The problem of authority cannot be solved by a sheaf of papers. Authority in the church must have a living voice. The normative sources of the Christian faith must be mediated and interpreted by persons competent to do so. But we don't know who they are in the present situation. If we cannot even count on the presiding bishop of the ELCA, then who? As Lutherans we must ask, "Where does the buck stop when it comes to matters of interpretation and discipline?" Seemingly it does not stop with bishops or with theologians or with church assemblies, because we have been assured that its decisions are not binding on anyone's conscience. We are in a free for all.

If any of you who read this brief essay might have a solution to the problem of authority in the church today, please let your voice be heard. The house is burning down. Please call the fire department, if you have the number.